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AMENDMENT TO THE CLAIMS

1. (currently amended) A computer implemented system for distributing in real-time, inventory data acquired from point-of-sale systems at any one of a plurality of retail systems, comprising:

~~(b)~~(a) a plurality of in-store systems for processing, storing, and communicating data;

~~(e)~~(b) a plurality of subscriber systems for generating and processing requests for data;  
and

~~(d)~~(c) a host system, operably coupled to the in-store systems and the subscriber systems, for processing, storing, and communicating data between the plurality of subscriber systems and the plurality of in-store systems.

2. (currently amended) The computer implemented system of claim 1, wherein the in-store systems, the subscriber systems and the host system are coupled to one another through a communication network configured to transmit and receive data among the in-store systems, the subscriber systems, and the host system, and to support a one of a transmission control protocol/internet protocol (TCP/IP) and hypertext transfer protocol (http).

3. (previously presented) The computer implemented system of claim 2, wherein each in-store system further comprises:

a point-of-sale device used to process sales transactions and generate sales transaction data and generate inventory data at a place of business of a merchant;

a memory database used to store merchant identification data, the sales transaction data, and the inventory data; and

an in-store communicator used to transmit and receive data in substantially real-time through said communication network.

4. (previously presented) The computer implemented system of claim 3, wherein each subscriber system further comprises:

a browser component useable by a consumer to access and view the inventory data indicative of a given merchant's inventory, in substantially real-time using said communication network; and

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a virtual store server useable to access inventory data in substantially real-time using said communication network and to process online sales of goods or services offered for sale by a given merchant.

5. (currently amended) The computer implemented system of claim 4, wherein the host system further comprises:

- a host system database used to store the inventory data, merchant identification data, and merchant network address data;
- a host system communicator used to receive and transmit data in substantially real-time between a plurality of in-store systems and a plurality of subscriber systems, using said communication network; and
- a data distributor to process data requests from said subscriber systems.

6. (previously presented) A method for processing and distributing real-time inventory data through a communication network, comprising the steps of:

- transmitting current inventory data, merchant identification data, and merchant network address data from an in-store system to a host system over the communication network;
- indexing and storing the current inventory data, merchant identification data, and merchant network address data using a host system database at the host system;
- processing requests for inventory data with a data distributor in the host system using said indexed and stored inventory data, merchant identification data, and merchant network address data in response to receiving a request for inventory data from a subscriber system; and
- transmitting a response to said subscriber system.

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7. (previously presented) The method of claim 6, wherein processing requests comprises:  
using the indexed and stored merchant network address data to initiate communication between said host system and said in-store system to retrieve inventory data when a request is made by said subscriber system.
8. (previously presented) The method of claim 6, wherein processing requests comprises:  
establishing a communication connection from said in-store system to said host system using the communication network;  
triggering said in-store system to transmit current inventory data, merchant identification data, and merchant network address data to said host system; and  
storing transmitted current inventory data, merchant identification data, and merchant network address data using said host system database.
9. (previously presented) The computer implemented system of claim 5, wherein the host system is configured to store a network address for the in-store systems.
10. (previously presented) The computer implemented system of claim 5, wherein the host system is configured to communicate with the in-store systems on behalf of the subscriber systems.
11. (previously presented) The computer implemented system of claim 5, wherein the inventory data is sent from the in-store systems to the host system, and wherein the host system is configured to either forward the inventory data to the subscriber system or store the inventory data in the host system for later access by the subscriber system.
12. (previously presented) The method of claim 6, wherein the host system stores a network address for the in-store systems.
13. (previously presented) The method of claim 6, wherein the host system communicates with the in-store system on behalf of the subscriber system.

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14. (previously presented) The method of claim 6, wherein transmitting current inventory data from the in-store system to the host system further comprises either forwarding current inventory data to the subscriber system or storing the current inventory data in the host system for later access.